

MAR 14 1960

Approved For Release 2005/01/05 : CIA-RDP75-00149R000700310007-7

Sec 5 Comp + cns
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Those Pentagon Leaks

If there is a single area in which the armed forces are unified, it is in their attitude toward the press. Reporters, the services agree, are people to be cultivated; they are also to be investigated. At least once a week, the hush-hush U.S. Assistant Defense Secretary Murray Snyder (who used to be a newspaperman himself), or some other Pentagon potentate, gives the order: "Find out who leaked that story!"

Sometimes the investigation begins because there has been a leak of a legitimate military secret; but just as often it is simply a matter of finding out how embarrassing facts got into reportorial hands. In either case, when the order is given, the Pentagon's gunshoes deploy.

Last week, investigative nostrils were sniffing out the sources of three stories in the press:

►A NEWSWEEK story (Feb. 22 issue) that the Air Force first learned of the "mystery satellite" circling the globe from an overheard conversation between two Navy officers who had known about it for days. No security violation was charged. But the Navy, stung by implications that it had delayed passing on news because of service rivalry, charged that the Air Force "planted" the story with a NEWSWEEK reporter. (It was no "plant.") The Air Force promptly ordered an inquiry to counter the countercharge.

►A New York Times report of Feb. 11 that two recent Russian attempts to fire long-range rockets over the Pacific had fizzled. U.S. intelligence wanted to know who had been indiscreet with a Times man. Pentagon officials buttoned their own lips and promptly ordered an exhaustive inquiry.

►Revelations by The New York Herald Tribune's syndicated clap-of-doom columnist Joseph Alsop about the Soviet's lead over the U.S. in missiles. Alsop's facts apparently reflected top secret testimony to the Senate Space Committee

and Preparedness Subcommittee by Allen W. Dulles, CIA Director. Republican senators angrily accused their Democratic colleagues of feeding the secret data to Alsop.

Instead of calling out its bloodhounds, newsmen in Washington think the Pentagon might better spend its time in devising a workable set of security ground rules for peacetime—or perhaps finding a new man to administer the old ones. For ever since Murray Snyder, a former New York Herald Tribune political writer, took over his job at the Pentagon in 1957, Washington reporters have been bitter at his tendency to suppress news for vague reasons. Once, during the Lebanon crisis, while radio appeals were broadcast for sailors to return to their ships, Snyder refused to acknowledge that a crisis existed.

But Snyder is not about to give up. Not long ago, a top magazine editor journeyed to the Pentagon for lunch with the then Defense Secretary Neil McElroy. The express purpose of the visit was to complain about Murray Snyder and to urge his replacement. But the subject never came up. Reason: Murray Snyder showed up for the lunch.